

The Ontology of Work: Social Relations and Doing in the Sphere of Necessity

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When Richard K. Brown (1984: 3-4) more than 25 years ago gave a speech to the British Sociological Association on research about working life, he said:

It never was satisfactory that 'work' should customarily be interpreted as referring solely to gainful employment in the official, formal economy. In the light of the sociological research and writing of the past decade or more such a restriction is completely untenable. In addition it deprives us of a major source of understanding and of explanation. (...) At the present time it is crucially important to maintain research and debate on the widest possible front.

What follows is intended as a contribution to this debate – a debate that I do not think has moved very much forward since this statement was made. I will try to clarify some theoretical problems in social scientific theory of work, suggest solutions to these problems, and ideas for further development of fruitful research on work.

I am going to argue that the debate has come to an impasse in a contradiction between properties of activities versus certain social relations. A second contradiction has been analysed by Karel Kosík (1976) and concerns an empirical versus an ontological conceptual basis – and in which he argues for the latter. My suggestion is an attempt to transcend these contradictions. But first a brief overview of the general development of definitions of work in social science.

Concepts of Work

Human work is as old as humans are – but work as a concept is young. There are still reasons to say that 'work is well known experientially, yet little understood conceptually' (Cummings and Srivastva 1977: 5). Paradoxically – or perhaps in consequence thereof – there exists a large number of work concepts; different academic disciplines have diverging perspectives and in many disciplines, perhaps especially in sociology, there is no consensus nowadays in understanding what 'work' is.

In pre-capitalist societies there was no abstract work concept, but with emerging capitalism a – still ongoing – debate was initiated. 'From the Enlightenment to the industrial revolution,' one researcher (Eyerman 1985: 27) comments, 'Europe was a battleground for competing conceptions of work'. The founder of Physiocracy, François Quesnay (orig. 1759), still regarded work only as definite activities: The farmer's work, the merchant's work, the entrepreneur's work, etc. But in the continuing development of political economy and its analyses of capitalism's relationships, a real work concept appears – a concept abstracted from the multifarious activities. The first great expression of this is usually said to be Adam Smith's (orig. 1776) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Less than a hundred years later, however, the debate had already become so disparate that the German economist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1862: 5) found himself called upon to complain that the word 'work' covered 'a veritable abyss of concepts'; it is, he said, 'an over-defined

word, into which so much meaning has been put that it simply does not have any meaning at all any more'.¹

Gradually, though, a unitary conception emerged, namely that work is those activities that are performed on the market – and thereby wage labour became the prototype for the concept. In the middle of the former century, mainstream work research was characterised by its central concept not being made explicit and hardly even discussed. The meaning of the concept became self-evident and research on work usually withdrew from the theoretical problems and the complexity of the concept by – mainly tacitly – accepting the easy formula 'work = wage labour'. In the same way as a non-decision is a form of decision, a non-definition functioned as the definition of work.

So far, in this brief story of the work concept in social science, it has moved from an undefined to an over-defined and finally to a non-defined concept. Then came a strong reaction to what was regarded as a narrow economic conception, i.e. activities on the market. And that is where we still are today. The critics' basic idea is that the work concept must be made wider, so that other activities can also be included. Often this more inclusive concept is built up by adding activities around wage work and with a starting point in this conception (see for example Daniels 1985, Horn 1981). Primarily, however, it does not seem to be a result of a theoretical discussion to develop a better work concept; rather, it appears as part of a wish to give certain activities a higher level of visibility and status. 'Work' is an important ideological concept in capitalist society (Accornero 1980, Anthony 1977, Krämer-Badoni 1978) and by taking advantage of this, these critics try to reach such aims. But this is seldom stated explicitly. One exception is the Norwegian sociologist Cato Wadel (1984: 23), who says that his main objective is to mark the importance of certain activities. He says that there is no theoretical motivation for his using the term, but that 'it upgrades an activity if it is called work'.

The problem with this perspective is that the work concept once again tends to be over-defined, but yet in another way than the one that Riehl meant: the 'widening' of the concept makes it so inclusive that it becomes meaningless. If one, for example, includes in the concept of work everything that a person does for 'securing identity, status and structure' or meeting role obligations (Wallman 1985: 52 and 1984: 52, respectively), then there is very little that is not work. A concept, that in this way includes almost everything loses its meaning.² Not surprisingly, there is also a reaction to this 'totalising' turn of the debate; it leads to the standpoint that work in fact *is* a meaningless concept (see for example Höfener 1977).

One type of limitation is, however, fairly common: The work concept should not include anything that can be regarded as morally bad or damaging, rather only that which is good. This train of thought all too easily leads to the more or less explicit position that everything that is good is work. The argument is, though, usually limited to the character of the product, for example arms ('activities that produce canons cannot be work'); it does not refer to the social relations within which the activities are performed. If the argument's moral principle were to be followed consequently, every activity in exploitative work forms would not be work; they can hardly be deemed as belonging to what is morally good.

The short history of work concepts in social science is varied and often confusing. The reference list of this paper can be regarded as a small example: there are quite a few texts in several languages and from several disciplines with titles on the theme 'what is work?'. But the question seems to me to be far from answered in a satisfactory way. Therefore I think that we who are doing research on work organisations and working life should use some of our efforts to continue discussing definitions of work.

¹ Quotations from other languages than English are translated by me.

² For a critique of this type of 'widening' of the concept of work, see Karlsson (1995).

As I have tried to show through this brief overview of the shifts in the debate on the work concept in social sciences, the core of the theoretical dilemma is this: the established formula ‘work = wage labour’ is inadequate; but the proposed solutions tend to make the concept limitless and thereby fruitless.

Analyses of the way in which the concept of work has been used in the social sciences are rare. The existing ones mainly use a tradition approach: they posit a number of research traditions against each other. This approach has as its rationale the work concept being regarded as part of a wider social theory or of a specific discipline. There are several such suggestions of dividing lines, usually put forward with a synthesising (or sometimes an eclectic) aim or as a contrast to the author’s own conceptual suggestion (for example Cohen 1953, Friedmann 1961, Gross 1958, Lufft 1925, Moser 1964, Nowak 1929, Ruyer 1948, Scheler 1971, Shimmin 1966, Tellegen 1957, von Weizäcker 1948). But I will diverge from all of them. My starting point is that there is a contradiction between whether work should be regarded as a set of activities per se or as those activities that are performed within certain social relationships. In the first case work activities tend to be seen as historical constants and as applicable to every member of a given society; these activities are work whenever, wherever and within whatever social relations they occur. In the second case an activity that is work during a given historical period or in connection with a specific social category, can be non-work during another period or in connection with another social category; it all depends on the social relations. When one wishes to analyse work, one can in the first case immediately go looking for the specified activities; in the second case one must first find the specified social relations.

Work as activities

The analysis of scientific work concepts made by Karl Elster in the beginning of the former century seems to be one of the most cited ones. His sources are almost exclusively encyclopaedias of the social sciences and his main conclusion is (1919: 621): ‘The different definitions agree on one point. They recognise that ”work” always is an activity’. And this is still the case – all definitions that I have found have this reference to work as having to do with activity.

The modern authors show, however, a difference from the older ones: none of them mentions the toil of an activity as a criterion for work, but in Elster’s review it has a prominent place. Thus, one author (Rosher, cit. in Elster 1919: 617-618) says that ‘the attribute of toil always belongs to the concept of work’. Nevertheless, Elster does not accept this idea and his primary argument against it is that the drudgery of an activity cannot in itself specify it as work. Effort is part of all activities in the sense that the agent expends energy – activities are toil. Further, there are many physical and psychological activities that require much more effort than those which are usually called work; among the examples are mountain climbing and chess playing. Elster’s objections might seem a bit simple, but at the same time satisfactory enough – especially as ‘toil’ has virtually disappeared from the conceptual discussion.

When it is established that work is an activity, some further kind of delimitation is made, so that certain activities are to be regarded as work and others are not. Often the criterion for an activity to be work is that it is directed towards a goal. Many authors thereby refer to this well-known passage of *Capital* (Marx 1970: 178):

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst

architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will.

This is an ontological conceptualisation by specifying a difference between human beings and other animals.³ But when it comes to distinguishing work from other human activities it seems wanting, which can perhaps be most clearly seen in the foremost elaboration of this theme – the one by Georg Lukács (1973, see also 1948: 431-463). The basis of his argument is that work is ‘telos realisation’, i.e. to reach a goal formulated in advance of performing the activity. ‘Teleological positioning’ (*teleologische Setzung*) is the essence of work. When the goal is formulated, the agent triggers a chain of causal determinants that – in their turn – lead to the goal being reached.

Lukács’ development of Marx’s reasoning has, however, been heavily criticised. Agnes Heller (1981) reminds us that all actions are teleological; Lukács simply regards them as modified versions of work activities. And work is in his interpretation a ‘one man show’ which only has to do with the goal of the agent. Therefore all social actions have to be explained by an analogy with the individual agent’s actions.

A different kind of critique has been delivered by Peter Ruben and Camilla Warnke (1979). In opposition to teleological positioning they stress the tool as the core of human work. It is through using tools that human beings have won the power to formulate goals; the tool is the ontological precondition for teleological positioning, not the other way around (1979: 23): ‘Teleological positionings are expressions of the consciousness that have been generated in and through work, i.e. not simply as preconditions for work, but rather its ideational element!’ Further, they say that it is seldom possible to understand in advance and predict all preconditions for the course of a work process. In reality work is always richer than the posited goal (including the instruments of work and their use). Thereby it is quite unrealistic to reduce work to what is teleologically posited.

In a similar way, Jürgen Habermas (especially 1968 and 1976) have delimited the work concept to ‘instrumental action’, but now in opposition to ‘communicative action’. The criticism against him therefore follows somewhat different lines and mainly points to his marginalising the concept by allowing traits of work in capitalism to be the model of its total conceptualisation. Thus Eyerman and Shipway (1981: 559) say:

Habermas takes *absolutely* for granted what is but a tendency under the capitalist mode of production; i.e., work for Habermas is only, has only ever been, and will always be, purely instrumental activity. The tendency towards instrumentality in the labor-nature process which reaches its greatest distortion under capitalism thus becomes absolutized for *all* historical periods and all social formations.

The characteristic that work is a goal-directed activity gives us, however, a possibility to put work in relation to some types of non-work. The dimensions that we can use are, then, activity vs. non-activity and goal-direction vs. non goal-direction. A non goal-directed activity is play – and there is a strong tradition of trying to find the characteristics of work by contrasting it with what denotes play (for example Marcuse 1973), as by placing ‘playing man’ – *homo ludens* – as an ideal against, or at least a complement to, ‘working man’ (for

³ Marx also defines work in a way that is ontological for human beings as such, which I will take up later.

example Huizinga 1955).⁴ Also the opposite to activity, passivity, can be goal-directed: rest, necessary for later being active. A non goal-directed passivity, finally, is idleness. Even here there is a tradition of positing idleness as an ideal against work; among the most famous texts in this tradition is Paul Lafargue's (1972 [1883]) *The Right to Idleness* – written in opposition to the parole 'the right to work' – and Bertrand Russell's (1960 [1932]) *In Praise of Idleness*.

If Lukács took the extreme position that goal direction is a sufficient criterion for an activity to be work, Wadel is at the other extreme. He explicitly rejects the aim of the activity as a relevant characteristic for the concept of work; instead he directs his attention towards the function of the activity (1977: 407, my emphasis): 'Work is human activity which can be shown to maintain, establish or change commonly valued social institutions, *whether these activities have this as a goal or not.*' But Wadel is an exception. Most other authors use goal-direction as a part of their definitions of work.

It should, however, be noted that a negative conceptualisation is an enormously influential line of thought: work is defined by what is *not* the aim of the activity. This is the perspective of classical economics, where work is primarily regarded as a sacrifice (cf. Macpherson 1985: 241). The most widely cited formulation comes from Alfred Marshall, although it originates from Jevons; work, Marshall (1907: 65, my emphasis) says, is 'any exertion of mind or body undergone partly or wholly with a view to some good *other than* the pleasure derived directly from the work'.

Sometimes this reasoning is driven a few steps further, so that work per definition must be unpleasant. An example can be found in Richard B. Lee's well-known study of !Kung San, a hunter-gather people in Botswana. Lee defines his work concept by listing a number of activities. Thereafter he asks (1979: 252): 'When a hunter consults the oracle discs, is that work? When he spends the evening in camp listening to reports of game sighting on the eve of a hunt, is he working?' And the answer is: 'Because these activities are carried out in a socially pleasurable context, I have not considered them as work'. Parts of the planning, the teleological positioning of the activity, is excluded simply because it takes place in a nice situation.

This reasoning has deep historical roots – going back at least to Greek Antiquity and the distinction between activity and contemplation, and in the evaluation of what these concepts stand for. The clearest connection to this idea in recent times can, as far as I know, be found in Yves Simon (1936). Human life contains, he says, two opposites: manual work and contemplation. In between these extremes we find spiritual work, which is nobler and work to a lesser degree than the manual type. There are, further, two kinds of spiritual work, namely that which prepares manual work (i.e. positioning of telos) and that which prepares contemplation; here the latter is nobler and work to a lesser degree than the former.⁵

It seems that it is untenable to base a fruitful social scientific definition of work on properties of activities as such. This is not very surprising if we consider that the objects of social science are relational. So, let us turn to the other side of the contradiction between activities and social relations.

Work as social relations

A number of authors restrict the application of their work concept to a specific type of society or even more limited contexts. Of course, this is a result of their research interests: Lee (1979)

⁴ For analyses where work and play are not entirely regarded as antonyms, see Burke (1971), d'Épinay (1992), and Okrent (1978-79).

⁵ Possibly Hannah Arendt's (1958) discussion of *vita activa* will also come to the reader's mind. Her line of reasoning is, however, quite different from that of Simon.

analyses a hunter-gather society and has no immediate reason to develop a more general definition; Dubin (1965) writes a text book on work in North American private enterprises (although he calls it *The World of Work*), and so on. At the same time, there are authors trying to find a concept in order to make it possible to compare societies and cultures, for example Udy (1970) and Lewenhak (1982).

Independent of scope in this regard, many arguments are built up around the social relations with which the activities are associated. One possibility is of course to establish the social nature of work at a general level. The most cited example is probably this: work is ‘an activity that produces something of value for other people’ (*Work in America* 1973: 3). The explicit aim with this formulation is to be able to include the housewife’s activities in the concept of work.⁶ Cases in which people ‘are productive only for themselves’ are regarded as a possible definition of leisure activities. This might, however, turn out to be a bit confusing, because the authors do not clarify whether they regard the relationship between work and leisure as contrary or contradictory: is leisure a surplus category – everything that is not work – or are there actions that fall outside the two categories? Are there, in other words, activities that do not produce anything of value to anyone? Another – and even more serious – problem is that all consumption in a market society will be work, as that is of value to the seller of the goods. The formulation does not provide a discrimination that holds.

There is, further, a strong idealistic trait in this kind of reasoning (perhaps most marked in Novarra 1980: 17ff): Only ‘good’ activities can be included in the work concept. A simple example to illustrate the misleading consequences thereof: the Swedish company Bofors produces arms; for a number of years it also made tooth paste. If we regard arms as something bad and tooth paste as something good, only the Bofors employees making tooth paste were working during this period – not those making cannons and ammunition. And today, when the company has stopped making tooth paste, none of the employees work. Even though it is a laudable aim to struggle for human work to produce only good things, I am afraid that such a concept can not be used to analyse work historically or today. And it is hardly fruitful to regard wage labour as non-work.

Often the social relations are made more precise than in the definitions that I have discussed so far – especially when a sociological perspective is contrasted to an economic view. Edward Gross, for example, says (1958: 11) that

the sociologist is interested in work insofar as it involves some form of social organization. The focus is therefore on what are called *work relationships*. A work relationship is one in which persons perform activities which are designed to achieve objectives usually defined by others. The activities that they perform are called “work”.

He gives an example of a factory work crew: The workers’ objectives are set by foremen, the boards of directors and, indirectly, by society at large through customers’ demand on the market.

Here, then, all leading functions in a work organisation are excluded from the work concept, a view that can be brought back to Max Weber’s (1978: 114) analysis. He distinguishes between those economic activities that are managerial (*disponierende*) and those that are oriented to managerial instructions; only the latter are regarded as work. Compared to

⁶ It is thus part of an effort to transcend the formula ‘work = wage labour’. Just how deeply rooted this idea is and how difficult it is to abandon it, is illustrated a bit further along in the same book. Concerning politics in relation to women’s choice between being a housewife and working on the labour market, it is said (1973: 63; my emphasis): ‘Government is quite appropriately reluctant to intervene in matters involving family life. Consequently, those responsible for public policy have often shied away from taking a stand on the pros and cons of women *working*’. Suddenly the activities of housewives are no longer work.

Lukács' reasoning, we here find that the unity between telos and its realisation is transformed into an absolute opposition, where solely the moment of realisation is allowed to be part of the work concept. One consequence of this argument is that it will be difficult in concrete research to deal with people who have both leading and telos-realising functions. The problem is a big one as all hierarchical work organisations have such groups; some of their tasks are made up of telos-positioning for the work of people below them, others of realising telos posited by people above them in the hierarchy. One example would be the foreman that Gross mentions: When does he work and when does he manage? There are also historical examples, among which the most obvious ones are the slave overseers of the Ancient world – often slaves themselves – and the bailiffs of the Middle Ages.

Against Lukács I argued that there are cases when one person formulates telos and another person realises it, and this can be work; against Gross (and Weber) the objection is the opposite one – there are also cases when one and the same person fulfils both functions and this can be work.

Further, Gross comments on his using the word 'usually' in the definition, saying that two exceptions may be considered. First, there are cases in which one or more agents themselves formulate goals for their actions. But such situations are, he argues, only brief and rather unimportant. Second, it is the social culture that determines people's goals. But culture operates through people, Gross says, and thereby also this objection is supposed to be of no consequence. His conclusion is that none of the exceptions are of any practical importance. His defence against the exceptions does, however, lead to some dubious points. Concerning the first exception, I do not at all find it without importance. All peasants who own their land and do not produce for a market – and they make up a large and important social category in history – would, for example, not be working. In this respect the definition seems to be too narrow. The argument about the second exception has the opposite consequence: It is difficult to find actions that do *not* have culturally determined goals (apart from purely biological reflexes). Here we must ask whether there are any interesting activities that are *not* work according to Gross.

In a similar way, one can object to Lee Braude's (1963: 347 and, somewhat modified, 1975: 12-13) formulation that says that work is all actions that the agent undertakes in order to survive socially; this includes all activities that the agent performs in order to enhance his or her position in the different status hierarchies of society. But are there not aspects of social survival – in Braude's meaning – in everything we do? This criterion hardly specifies a certain category of actions. He also – like for example Sylvia Shimmin (1966: 197) – lets the views of the agent be partly decisive for the definition. This is acceptable as a starting point for social scientific concept building, but not as an end point. Scientific concepts are, or should be, different from everyday concepts.

In the few explicit definitions of what I have termed the non-defined work concept – according to 'work = wage labour' – we find the clearest specified social relationship. 'By work', Dubin (1965: 4) says, 'we mean continuous employment, in the production of goods and services, for remuneration' – and he makes clear that with remuneration he means a wage in a modern exchange economy.

The main problem with the social relations approach to definitions of work is that it is unclear what types of social relations are to be taken into account and what they are to be about: What kind of social relation of what? We need a principle for this to be able to solve the contradiction between activities and social relations as a basis for the concept. Otherwise it becomes all too easy to neglect the contradiction as such.

As an example thereof we can regard the following quotation from a well-known analysis of women's work. The authors, Louise Tilly and Joan W. Scott (1978: 3), explain their way of using the work concept like this:

Work is defined as productive activity for household use or for exchange. The meaning, location, and nature of work, of course, have changed over time. During the nineteenth century what we have termed work usually meant wage earning, as it does today. But in earlier centuries the jobs women performed to help support their families did not always or necessarily bring in money. Growing vegetables, raising animals, preparing food, making clothing, and helping with farm or craft work served household needs. These activities had economic value, but it was more often what economists call “use value” than “exchange value.” Furthermore, this kind of work merged imperceptibly with women’s household or domestic chores. As a result our use of the term *work* for the early modern period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries encompasses all of these activities. For the period of industrialization, however, work denotes only market-oriented, or wage-earning jobs. This definition is somewhat arbitrary, for it excludes domestic activity, the useful, economically valuable housework that women perform for their families. We do not deny that unpaid household labor is work. Indeed, we suggest that its value to families was often seen as greater than the value of women’s wage labor. To avoid confusion, however, we have found it useful to refer to housework as domestic activity in order to distinguish it from wage-earning or “productive” activity. Similarly, reproduction – the bearing and raising of children – is a kind of “work” with economic value to society and to the family. Nonetheless, it is not included in our use of the term *work*.

A first problem with this way of reasoning is that it creates confusion in spite of the terms being chosen to avoid just that: household work is work, but to make things clear we do not call it work; bearing and raising children is also work, but in order not to mix things up we will not call that work either. This clearly is suggestive of the – often unreflected – resistance that many researchers have against using more than a single work concept. Instead of discussing in terms of *different* social work forms, Tilly and Scott prefer to sometimes avoid the work concept.

There is, however, also an inconsistency in the conceptual basis. The authors discuss in fact at least three types of work: household work, reproduction and wage labour. But only the first two phenomena are *activities* in themselves; they can be defined by enumerating activities that are to make up the concept. The third phenomenon – wage labour – is, however, not an activity, but a *social relation*. It can not be defined through a list of activities; it must be defined by substantial social relationships, within which any number or kinds of activities can be performed.

The problem is, then, that a definition of work according to properties of activities is wanting. But so is the formula work = wage labour, although that is the least ambiguous definition not depending on activities but on a social relation. But, as I mentioned at the start of this paper, there is also another conceptual contradiction concerning work. Maybe that can give some inspiration for a solution.

The Doing in the Sphere of Necessity

In a philosophical critique of the work concept in the social sciences, Karel Kosík (1976: 118f) says: Social scientists express a very limited view on human work, as they discuss the work concept with a starting point in an analysis of work activities – work in its empirical forms; thereby they miss the whole point, they do not even touch the problematic of work. Their reasoning expresses theoretical confusion, uncritical empiricism and sociologism. The

question what work is, is a question for philosophers – social scientists are not equipped to deal with it; 'work' is an ontological concept, not an empirical one.⁷ Hard words – but worth listening to and reflect upon.

A common trait in social scientific definitions of work is, as I have noted, that it is an activity. But Kosík directs his critique against what he considers to be a limitation in this idea; thereby he is building on – apart from Hegel and Marx – an early article by Marcuse (1973; orig. 1933). Kosík's point of departure is Hegel's emphasis on work not being an activity like any other activity; it is a *doing* (*Tun*), something that permeates human life and history. In general outline, Hegel's view may be summarised thus: it is in work that human beings differ from the animals. The latter satisfy their needs through directly consuming what nature provides, but humans transcend this level – even though we too have a biological, instinctively grounded side; through work we transform natural materials according to our intentions. Thereby we gain knowledge about the characteristics of the objects and we learn the laws that govern our beings. Then we use this knowledge in the processes of work, which in its turn further develops the transformation of natural objects that we can accomplish. Work means, then, that our theoretical knowledge of the world develops and we move away from the purely instinctive stage. 'The role of labour,' a commentator (Plant 1977: 84) on Hegel's view says, 'is crucial; it inaugurates human history, the record of man's transformation of his environment, and distinguishes man from animal and the evolution of merely natural forms'.

The idea that humans create themselves and their world through work is the basis of this ontological work concept.⁸ The question 'what is work?' is an aspect of the question 'what are human beings?'. The idea that work is a specifically human activity is, however, not limited to the Marxist tradition. It is, thus, very strongly expressed by Schrecker (who explicitly distances himself from Hegel as well as Marx): Only humans create civilisation and make history; the activities accomplishing this are work.⁹ Without this specific character of work, he says (1967: 140), society is 'transformed into a natural association comparable to an ant hill or beehive, and ultimately to a machinery which, once put into action, has no further history.'

When Marcuse (1973) discusses the work concept, he too takes his point of departure in the thought that humans thereby actively and consciously create themselves; at the same time he emphasises another side of work. He devotes the main part of his analysis to what he terms the 'burdensome character' (*Lastcharakter*) of work. This exists independently of the way in which the process of work is organised, other working conditions and the experiences of the worker. The *Lastcharakter* lies in that the worker is subjected to the laws of things in work. And further (1973: 17): 'In labor it is always primarily a question of the thing itself and not of the laborer (...). In labor one is always distanced from one's self-being and directed toward something else: one is always with others and for others'. To some extent this analysis is due to Marcuse at this time being influenced by Martin Heidegger (cf. Moser 1964, and Kellner 1973). And Kosík (1976: 130f) criticises Marcuse for, among other things, the emphasis on the development of the individual and for not distinguishing between on the one hand the fact that humans create things and on the other, that social institutions can appear as though they were things.

⁷ A similar standpoint, though stated in different terms, can be found in Kwant (1969: 122f).

⁸ There are mainly two lines of argument against this idea. The first says that certainly there is such a difference between humans and (other) animals, but this has a supernatural origin – we have not created ourselves, we are created by God (for example Crosby 1976). The second maintains that the difference does not exist, at least not in such a marked way (for example Ingold 1983). It would, however, lead too far to go into this critique here. (For a defence of the idea, see Cornell 1986: 18ff, and Woolfson 1982).

⁹ An almost literal formulation can be found in an article by Jean Lacroix (1952: 21): 'to work is to have an history, it is to make history.'

But Kosík makes use of the perspective of the two sides of work. In the continued philosophical investigation, he develops the argument in the following way: what constitutes work is its objectivity – a concept that contains two phenomena. First that the result of work is a durable product; the activity is objectified. Second that work is an instance of human beings as objective subject – as practical beings. The objectified creations exist independently of the consciousness of the individual and they are a precondition for the continuity of human existence.

Kosík summarises what is specific in work: It is there that human beings humanise nature and objectify their intentions; we thereby live in a world that we create ourselves – in opposition to the (other) animals, who are tied to the naturally given conditions. So far, however, we have mainly been concerned with human doing at a general level. When Kosík goes on to further specify the work concept, he refers to the following quotation from Marx (1972: 257):

Labour-time, even if exchange-value is eliminated, always remains the creative substance of wealth and the measure of the *cost* of its production. But free time, *disposable time*, is wealth itself, partly for the enjoyment of the product, partly for the free activity which – unlike labour – is not dominated by the pressure of extraneous purpose which must be fulfilled, and the fulfilment of which is regarded as a natural necessity or a social duty, according to one's inclinations.

Kosík's conclusion is that *work is the doing of human beings in the sphere of necessity*.¹⁰ We work when what we do is based on an external necessity to which we must submit in order to secure our existence. (However, Kosík says, the sphere of necessity cannot be counterposed in any simple way to an independent sphere of freedom; this is an important philosophical insight, but I cannot enter this discussion here.)

The conclusion implies that a specific activity can be work or non-work depending on whether it is performed as a necessary precondition for existence. To exemplify the point, Kosík (1976: 124) says: Aristotle did not work when writing his *œuvre* – his existence was secured anyway. But the modern professor of philosophy works when translating Aristotle, as this activity is performed as part of an occupation – it is a socially determined necessity for his or her earning an income.¹¹

A conclusion that we can draw from the argument that I have reviewed, is that what I have spoken of so far as the basis for an ontological work concept, now must be reconsidered. According to this concept, human work creates human beings. Probably it can be regarded as historically correct – at least after the so called original affluent societies (Lee 1979, Sahlins 1972) – as human doing is and has been work to such a high degree.¹² It is, however, a theoretically insufficient formulation and instead it should read: Human doing creates human beings. The concept 'doing' is broader than the concept 'work.' Work is doing in the sphere of necessity; doing can in principle – as opposed to work – exist also in the sphere of freedom.

Kosík poses this concept of work against what he regards as the concept in social science: empirical activities. As we have seen, this is only one side of a conceptual contradiction, in which social relations is the other. Even though Kosík's picture of the debate in the social

¹⁰ Sometimes the sphere of necessity is regarded as simply material production – or the core of such production (i.e. Ganssmann (1994:75) – but that is a too restricted interpretation.

¹¹ Perhaps it was not an entirely successful choice by Kosík to take Aristotle as his example. According to what we know about Aristotle's biography, parts of his philosophical activities were probably work in Kosík's meaning. I refer to it anyway, as it illustrates his argument so well.

¹² An often quoted analysis of the history of ideas on work is, for example, introduced by this sentence (Febvre 1948: 19): 'As long as there have been Men, work has not ceased to fill life for the majority of them.'

sciences seems incomplete, I think he provides us with the key to solve the conceptual problems. The formulation 'humans' doing in the sphere of necessity' can be seen as an overriding definition of work. For social scientific research, however, this is not enough. Our task is to analyse the specific and substantial historical and social forms of work. The ontological work concept indicates a roughly delimited area of analysis for social scientific studies. These studies can not, consequently, be based on an activities approach to the concept of work. We need a whole set of concepts to cover different types of social relations within the 'sphere of necessity.' The often heard claim that we must widen the work concept can thereby be dispensed with – and thereby also the risk of turning work into a meaningless concept for the social sciences. The idea of widening *the* work concept is replaced with the ambition of developing work concepts. Thereby we can avoid the impasse of realising that a particular phenomenon probably is work, but not being able to analyse it as such, due to a poor and rigid terminology.

But there are many types of relations and we need some type of distinction here. A basic distinction is made by Roy Bhaskar (1989: 42): 'A relation R_{AB} may be defined as *internal* if and only if A would not be what it *essentially* is unless B is related to it in the way that it is.' Internal social relations are distinguished from *external* ones, i.e. relations that are possible but not necessary for the existence of A; and an internal social relation make up a social structure (Sayer 1992). Whether an activity is to be regarded as belonging to the category work, depends on the social relations within which it is performed. The critique against the formula 'work = wage labour' has been extremely important, but it has missed the decisive theoretical point that this formulation contains: It indicates a specific *work form*, a specific internal social relation, a social structure – the one involving capitalists and wage labourers: none of them would be what they are without the relationship between them. Instead of adding a number of activities to wage work we can now try to delimit also *other such relations*, developing a terminology that covers a whole set of work forms – i.e. internal social relations structuring the sphere of necessity.

Work forms

It lies outside the scope and ambition of this paper to try to present a full typology of work forms. I will, however, discuss two existing typologies that I regard as non-starters; then I will outline some work forms that I suggest as starters for such an analysis.

Let me first note that there is in the relevant literature what can be called a conventional model of work through history, based on social forms of work defined through internal relations. The word 'conventional' often gets a pejorative ring, but I see its meaning as composed of two parts: On the one hand it denotes something that is well established and often used; on the other hand it has the meaning of something stiff and formal. It is in this double and linked sense that I talk about a conventional model. The model says that there are four types of social work forms in human history, namely slavery, serfdom, wage labour and independent work. Often, however, the latter form is excluded and the model is reduced to three work forms. M. I. Finley (1981: 142) strongly turns against this model, saying: 'We are in thrall to a very primitive sociology which assumes that there are only three kinds of labour-status: the free, contractual wage-earner, the serf, and the slave. Everyone must somehow be fitted into one of these categories.' The conventional model probably has its strongest hold in Marxist tradition (for example Cohen 1978: 63ff), but it exists more or less explicitly also in several non-Marxist theories of societies and work through history.

Self-employment, which is a very old work form, still exists in modern capitalist societies, where wage labour of course is the dominant work form. And thereby the potential of the

model is emptied, as neither slavery nor serfdom are present. This seems a bit thin, though, especially as several current typologies are richer. Therefore I want to discuss two such typologies, namely those proposed by Enzo Mingione and Ray Pahl, respectively. I choose them as they come closest to the theoretical principle that I have suggested: work forms are internal social relations that structure the sphere of necessity.

Mingione (1985, 1991) defines work as those activities that contribute to material survival. His definition is, then, not built on social relations, but the typology of work forms that he suggests is still construed in such a way that social relations (although not always internal ones) are the basis of its dimensions. He uses four dimensions: a) if the activity is formal or informal; b) if it is legal, illegal or not provided for by law; c) if money is involved or not; and d) if it is public or private. This makes up rather a complicated model. All formal work forms are legal, monetary and public; the informal ones can be illegal as well as not provided for by law, monetary as well as non-monetary, public as well as private. Put together, the dimensions would logically result in sixty-four work forms, but Mingione limits his discussion to eight forms: 1) purely formal activities, 2) mixed formal/informal activities, 3) activities that elude fiscal, social security or labour legislation, 4) criminal activities, 5) paid activities or transactions not provided for by law, 6) reciprocal or voluntary unpaid activities, 7) self-provision in the household, and 8) normal domestic work.

Now, it seems to me that Mingione's typology is an example of a 'chaotic conceptualisation'. A chaotic concept 'arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby "carving up" the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form' (Sayer 1992: 138). Above all chaotic concepts neglect the distinctions between formal and substantial, external and internal relations. It would be very hard to be able to perceive Mingione's eight work forms as social structures. Let me therefore turn to Pahl's typology.

Pahl's (1984: 123ff, 1988, 1997) concept of work has the meaning of 'getting by', which might be regarded as a version of the idea of doing in the sphere of necessity. He also emphasises that the important analysis concerns the social relations in which the tasks are embedded. Throughout, he uses the example of a woman ironing and we recognise two of the work forms from the conventional model: wage work and self employment. In the first case the woman is an employee whose task it is to iron shirts, in the second case she has a small business in which she performs this service. The other work forms are new ones. In symbolic work the activity is performed out of love; the woman irons her lover's shirt, thinking about him while she does so. Patriarchal work is different: Here she does the same thing, but not for love; instead she is dominated by her husband. Another category is work related to but not part of employment, for example if the woman irons her own blouse because her wage work requires that she looks neat. Unpaid community work is the case when she irons an older relative's clothes if this relative is not able to take care of the task. Reciprocal work, finally, is performed with the idea of getting a comparable favour in return some other time.

Pahl has an important point in stressing the social relations: the same activity – ironing – can be performed within quite different relations and thereby different work forms. This could also be taken as implying that this activity can actually be non-work, which in Pahl's argument is play. The typology seems to me to be much more clear than the one suggested by Mingione. But it still contains problematic traits. The most important one is that Pahl does not make a distinction between external and internal social relations. The typology is not as 'chaotic' as Mingione's typology, but the concept 'getting by' must be given an immensely wide interpretation to be applicable. If, for example, symbolic work (activity for love) is to be regarded as a *work* form, 'getting by' loses any distinct meaning. We are back at the problems with the tradition of widening the concept of work: it becomes so wide that it loses all meaning. Further, Pahl is not following his own principle in a consistent way. Regarding one

of his ironing scenes he says (1988:747): ‘The activity is genuinely a pleasure and would not, therefore, be classed as work.’ In this case it is not the type of social relation that is decisive, but the feelings of the worker – and he falls back on the idea that work can not be pleasurable.

These two ‘richer’ typologies do not – it seems to me – lead us anywhere but into cul-de-sacs, so we have to start again with wage work and self employment. In the debate about the concept of work, wage work is usually taken as a given; it is seldom problematised as a work form. In labour market theory and class theory, however, different forms of wage work are discussed (see for example Højrup 1996, Karlsson 1995, McRae 1986). On this basis I suggest that we distinguish at least two types of wage work: proletarian and career wage work. Both are, of course, situated on the labour market, but there the similarity ends. In proletarian wage work what is sold on the labour market is the right to control one’s labour power during a specified period of time. The buyer of labour power is responsible for the use of it, i.e. what the worker is to do. The basic trait is then time: The wage worker sells labour power per time unit. In career work, on the other hand, time is not the ‘goods’ on the labour market, but expertise, for example competence to handle functions like marketing, product development, research or management. To a large extent it is the career worker’s responsibility to take care of these functions, even if it would require activities outside ‘normal’ working hours.

Further, the position in the hierarchy of work organisations is subordinate in proletarian wage work and superordinate in career wage work. In the first case there are no career ladders to climb; the workers can of course change jobs, but such changes do not give them more power or a ‘higher’ position. In the second case the labour market is structured as career ladders; the workers start at a low level but by achieving good results, showing ambition and loyalty, and gaining educational credentials they can obtain promotions.

Self employment is a third work form. Here, the social relation is not that of the labour market, but that of the market for products or services. The workers do not primarily sell their labour power, but the results of their work. Usually three criteria are mentioned for this work form (Bechhofer and Elliott 1981: 138): the self employed control their own labour power and they own some kind of production instruments; the labour power of the family is part of the production process;¹³ and if there are employees, their labour power is to be regarded as an extension of that of the family.

There is also the work form of investors – or capitalists. In Marxist as well as Weberian social theory, the activities of investors are usually not regarded as work. Following the concept that I suggest, they are. The defining social relationship for this work form is neither primarily the labour market nor the market for goods and services, but the stock market.

Regarding these four work forms one might ask: What about the criticism in the debate on the concept of work that says that (women’s) household activities are being excluded? Where is child care, cleaning the house, washing up? First of all, in my perspective these are activities, not social relations and thereby not work in themselves. When child care is carried out within the social relations of a work form it is work; when it is not, it belongs to some other category. On the other hand I want to suggest that there are a number of work forms that empirically are virtually women-specific. Each one of them is structurally coupled to one of the four work forms that I have mentioned so far. It should, however, be noted that a theory of work cannot *explain* why these work forms are women-specific. A theory of patriarchy that is not based on or involves the concept of work is necessary for such an explanation.¹⁴

¹³ In a wider perspective self employment is a type within a much larger work form that can be called *family work*. Historically family work is a very important work form, and it has often been combined with several forms of forced work, such as conscription and tenantry (Karlsson 1986: 64ff).

¹⁴ Recent feminist research argues that the ‘totalisation of ”work”’ (Jónasdóttir 1994: 69ff) in explanations of sex/gender relations has led to a theoretical impasse. Liselotte Jakobsen and I (1993) have tried to combine the

The housewife work form is connected to that of proletarian wage work, and the back-up woman work form to that of career work. This means that they are quite different (Jakobsen and Karlsson 1993, Christensen 1987). The housewife's activities are directed towards the home and the family. But she cannot influence that on which her livelihood is based, namely her husband's wage, which is set in negotiations over which she has no influence at all. The back-up woman's activities, on the other hand, is directed towards her husband's career, which she can influence to some extent. His success is not only dependent on his performance directly in work, but also on his showing the 'correct' lifestyle – and it is the back-up woman who produces this life-style.

Theoretically there are reasons to believe that there is a women-specific work form connected to independent work and to investor work respectively. However, very little is known about them. Concerning investors Daniel Bertaux (1983: 79) has remarked that they 'certainly are among the least known of all social categories'; although this seems correct, it could be added that the investor wife is even less known to social science – and that goes perhaps also for the independent worker's wife.

Conclusion

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